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ABSTRACT

Current practices in implementing social skills instruction into elementary and secondary curricula are explored in this report. Two issues are addressed: (1) teacher reports of current and desired activities; and (2) the extent to which curriculum availability, other resources, teacher training, and values affect teacher activities. Questionnaires were completed by 271 teachers from 16 schools in an urban area on the East Coast. No significant differences were found between the current and desired levels of instruction, indicating general teacher satisfaction with current social skills instruction activities. Most teachers expressed a preference for integration with other academic areas. Findings pointed to limited activities by secondary teachers and a positive relationship between social skills instruction activities and availability of resources. Problems in implementation included lack of training and time constraints, enhanced by the perception that such instruction is the parents' responsibility. The recommendation is made to clarify the role of social skills training in the schools. Eight tables are included. (18 references) (LMI)

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American Educational Research Association
Chicago, Illinois
April, 1991

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Social Skills Instruction in Elementary and Secondary Education: Factors Effecting Curriculum Implementation

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In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the development of students' social skills. Much of this interest has been need driven; that is, many students within the schools appear to lack the social behaviors required to succeed within the school's mainstream (Kauffman, Lloyd & McGee, 1989; Kerr & Zigmond, 1986), while poor social interactions have also been associated with dropping out of school and later societal and vocational failures (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Many educators are concerned about the manner in which social skills instruction is approached within the schools (Kain, Downs and Black, 1988; Gerler, 1986; Cartledge and Milburn, 1980). While our schools have made a concerted effort to improve student performance in academic subject matter areas via mandated competency requirements, there is little evidence that social skills curriculum and instruction have such a definitive presence. The weaker position of social skills instruction within the schools may be related to a number of factors, including a lack of clarity in defining social skills, and limitations in knowledge about effective instructional practices. Other practical issues, such as a lack of resources and training to implement social skills activities, and competition with other academic demands for time in the school day, may also play a role in determining the nature of social skills activities within the school curriculum.

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Defining social skills

Different perspectives are reflected in current definitions of social skills. Most definitions reflect the importance of considering the social demands and expectations of the environment in determining the appropriateness of social behavior. This context specificity is particularly important with regard to student behavior in the schools; not only do teacher expectations vary across classes (Walker & Rankin, 1983), but teacher identified and peer identified needs are also different (e.g. Cartledge, Frew & Zaharias, 1985; Hymel, 1983). Teachers tend to identify social behaviors related to receipt of instruction, or social responsibility (Wentzel, 1991) while peers tend to focus on skills required for social interactions.

Gresham (1981) posits that social skills need to be defined on the basis of their 'social validity'. That is, social skills are those behaviors which, within a given situation, predict important social outcomes such as (a) peer acceptance or popularity, (b) significant others' judgements of behavior, or (c) other social behaviors known to correlate consistently with peer acceptance or significant others' judgements. According to this definition social skills are a socially defined phenomena. In relation to developing social skills curricula, this definition suggests the need for clarity of goals in determining students' requisite and desired social behaviors.

Social skills curriculum and instruction

A number of social skills programs have been developed for use with elementary and/or secondary students. Some programs provide social skills instruction as a discrete content area (Goldstein, Sprafkin, Gershaw & Klein, 1980; Lenz, Schumaker, Hazel & Clark, 1989; Walker, McConnell, Holmes, Todis, Walker, & Golden, 1983; Waksman & Messmer, 1985; Stephens, 1978; Spence, 1981). Instructional modules may focus on

making friends, drug education or developing appropriate classroom skills. Social skills instruction can also be integrated into other academic content areas through the 'process' by which those academic content areas are covered, most commonly through the use of cooperative learning techniques (e.g. Slavin, 1980). That is, in addition to learning academic content, students in cooperative groups are asked to engage in specific social behaviors, such as taking turns, sharing ideas and compromising.

There are currently no known studies which compare teacher perceptions of the utility or effectiveness of these approaches. At face value each approach has certain strengths and weaknesses. Modular approaches, for example, while providing intensive focus on areas of potential need often also have intensive time requirements which may compete with other academic time demands. The social impact of cooperative learning, on the other hand, while positive for many students may not be as effective for students whose learning or behavior problems prevent them from being an effective group participant (Cosden & Haring, in press).

Further, despite the apparent need for social skills instruction, it is often not considered a vital component of the curriculum. There are many factors that may discourage the use of social skills instruction in the schools. Among these: administrative priorities, resource availability, skills for implementing social skills instruction, and teacher values for that instruction.

The investigators have developed a school questionnaire to address these issues. This survey assesses: 1) teacher preferences for different types and levels of social skills curriculum and instruction and, 2) the extent to which curriculum availability, other resources, teacher training

and values for social skills instruction effected teacher activities in this area.

Initially, this survey was conducted in two secondary schools (Cosden, Iannaccone, & Wienke, 1990; Iannaccone, Wienke & Cosden, under review). Two different pictures emerged with regard to current and desired practices in social skills development. The first school was in a rural, middle to lower socioeconomic area of the Southwest. Overall, teachers reported that they were not highly engaged in social skills instruction, but that they would like to be more active in this area. They described their current limitations as a function of poor access to resources, including social skills curricula, and a lack of training. Teachers indicated that their direct experiences in the classroom and their personal background had greater impact on the development of their competencies for delivering social skills instruction, than did their inservice or preservice training experiences.

The second school was in a more affluent suburban area in the Northeast. In this school, two distinct groups of teachers emerged: those who reported that they were engaged in higher levels of social skills activities, either through the use of discrete modules or through integration into other curricular activities, and those teachers who stated they were not actively engaged in social skills activities except on a reactive basis. Both groups indicated that they were content with their current level of activity in this area. These groups varied in terms of their reported access to resources, perceived skills, and values for social skills instruction. That is, teachers who reported doing more in terms of social skills instruction also reported greater access to curriculum materials and other resources, more competencies in this area, and more value for social skills instruction. It is unclear through this correlational design whether

teachers who engage in more social skills instruction do so because they have more access to resources, or if the teachers who want to do more in terms of social skills development find resources to help them do this instruction.

The purpose of the present study was to examine current practices in social skills instruction among a broader sample of both elementary and secondary educators. This paper will focus on two major aspects of the larger data set: 1) teacher reports of current and desired activities with regard to social skills instruction, and 2) a description of available and desired curriculum materials to support instruction in this area.

Method

Subjects

Questionnaires were distributed to 16 schools in an urban area on the East Coast. Response to the questionnaire was voluntary. A total of 271 teachers responded to the survey. Table 1 presents the number of respondents per school. Of these teachers, 192 identified themselves as general educators, 66 as special educators, and 11 as other support personnel. Educators had a mean of 15.87 years of teaching experience. Of these teachers, 186 (68.63%) reported working solely with elementary age children, 55 (20.29%) reported working with junior high age children (7-8th graders in K-8 schools), and 30 (11.07%) worked across age groups.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire (see Appendix) presents items in multiple choice, multiple selection, and Likert scale formats. The questionnaire was used to assess the teachers' current and ideal levels of involvement with social skills curriculum and instruction, and the resources, skills, and values which influenced their activities.

To assess involvement in social skills activities, teachers were asked to select one of a series of options which described their best efforts in this area (see Table 2). At the upper end of the continuum, alternatives reflected 'proactive' approaches to social skills instruction, that is, social skills instruction that was planned and conducted as part of the regular curriculum. These alternatives included social skills instruction that was provided as a discrete content area as well as instruction that was assimilated into group activities or embedded in other academic content areas. At the lower end of the continuum options were indicative of 'reactive' responses to emergent social skills needs in the classroom. Teachers were asked to select one of these options in order to describe their current level of social skills instruction as well as to indicate their ideal level of social skills instruction. Further details about the nature of their social skills curriculum or how social skills were integrated into other curricular activities were not assessed as part of this question. For purposes of analysis, items were clustered into three tiers: 1) proactive/discrete module, 2) proactive/integrated and 3) reactive.

Additional items analyzed here include an assessment of the availability of social skills curricula and the name or nature of that curricula. Teachers were also asked to indicate what they felt should be the focus of social skills curriculum and instruction. Their responses to this item were transcribed and categorically coded.

Results

Teachers' current social skills activities, and their goals for social skills instruction, are delineated in Table 3. Most teachers had a preference for integration of social skills instruction within other academic content areas over providing social skills instruction as a discrete content area or

responding to social needs in a reactive manner, but all choices were represented. Differences in scaled scores for current and desired activities were not statistically significant. Thus, as a whole, teachers reported that they were relatively content with their current level of social skills instruction.

Differences in current and desired instructional activities as a function of student age were also assessed. Significant differences were found between elementary and secondary teachers with regard to current types of activities. As indicated in Table 4, a greater proportion of secondary teachers were engaged in reactive forms of social skills instruction than were than were elementary teachers, x^2 (2, N=237) = 10.91, p<.005. No differences were found for elementary and secondary teachers with regard to desired social skills activities; most teachers wanted integration of social skills instruction into other curricular activities.

Perceived access to resources was also assessed, as shown in Table 5. While elementary teachers indicated more access to social skills curricula, these differences were not significant. Overall, approximately one fourth of all teachers indicated that they did not have access to any curriculum materials.

The impact of curriculum availability on social skills instruction was assessed in two ways. A correlational analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between access to curriculum and level of social skills instruction. A significant relationship was obtained between not having access to any curriculum and lower levels of social skills activities, r=.334, p<.05.

In addition, teachers were stratified into two groups: group 1 was composed of teachers who reported proactive forms of social skills instruction (either use of discrete instructional modules or integration of

social skills instruction within other academic content instruction), while group 2 was composed of teachers who engaged in reactive forms of social skills activities. As indicated in Table 6, teachers who engaged in higher levels of social skills instruction also reported more access to curriculum materials, while more teachers who engaged in reactive forms of social skills activities reported no access to social skills curriculum. These associations do not suggest causality, but reflect the co-dependence of these two variables.

Types of curriculum materials

Teachers listed both the commercial materials available to them, and those that they created themselves. As seen in Table 7 only a small proportion of the teachers in the sample named specific curriculum materials. The largest number of responses indicated use of the New York State curriculum guidelines for addressing social skills needs. Different facets of that curriculum were identified by different teachers as relevant to the domain of social skills instruction. Only three other programs were listed by five or more respondents. Each of these programs, Effective Parenting Information for Children (EPIC), Prevention is Primary (PIP) and Quality Integrated Education (QIE) addresses specific, albeit different, aspects of social skill needs. Further analysis of the components of these programs, and differences in perceived availability and utility for elementary and secondary teachers, is forthcoming.

Yet a smaller number of teachers reported preparing their own curriculum materials. The range of responses to this item reflects the variety of content areas and methods currently used by teachers to address the social skills needs of their students.

Finally teachers reported what they would like to see as the focus of social skills curriculum and instruction. This turned out to be an unusually

rich source of material. Teachers responses were categorically coded; these categories,and the number of teachers who indicated the importance of each category, are reported in Table 8.

What is apparent from this list is that there are a variety of goals which teachers hold for social skills instruction. The largest proportion of teachers (23%) wrote that respect for others should be the primary factor addressed through social skills instruction. The next largest proportion of teachers (20%) noted the importance of self respect and self esteem. Developing a sense of responsibility for one's actions, improving peer interactions, enhancing adult relationships, developing problem solving skills, basic manner, increased cultural understanding and respect and skills for cooperative learning were among the other goals addressed by teachers.

This categorization scheme does not adequately represent the emotional tone to many of the teachers' comments. At the end of Table 8, some of the teachers' comments regarding the perceived problems in delivering social skills instruction are provided. Note that there responses were not elicited by a question directing teachers to discuss the problems in curriculum implementation; there comments were provided in response to requests for ideas for the focus of social skills curriculum and instruction.

The problems noted by teachers fell into four general categories. First, several teachers indicated that social skills instruction had to be considered within the broader social context for their students. That is, teachers questioned the potential for impact of social skills instruction on students who live in an unfair or abusive environment. Second, a number of teachers felt that social skills development ought not to be a school responsibility. These teachers reported that they felt that parents ought to be the primary vehicles for delivery of social skills instruction, and that

the schools were picking up that responsibility only because the family system was failing for some children. Third, teachers commented on their inability to provide social skills instruction given the priority of other academic demands. Finally, the need for teacher training in this area was reported by a number of respondents. The need for both preservice and inservice training was expressed.

Differences in perceptions as a function of grade level will also be analyzed.

Discussion

Teachers in this study varied with regard to their current and desired instructional activities related to the development of students' social skills. No significant differences between current and desired levels of instruction were obtained, indicating that teachers, overall, were content with their current level of activity of social skill activity.

While the majority of teachers indicated a preference for integration of social skills instruction within other academic content areas, the methods by which this integration could occur remain to be clarified. In their comments some teachers indicated that they viewed this integration as a relatively informal set of procedures, with teachers serving as role models or providing students with ongoing feedback regarding their social behavior. Other teachers indicated that they viewed training in cooperative group skills an integral part of any integrative effort. There is a need for further research on the impact of these instructional variations.

Fewer secondary than elementary teachers engaged in proactive forms of social skills instruction. That is, more secondary teachers limited their social skills activities to reacting to the emerging needs of their students. While acknowledging the significant problems in social behavior exhibited

by their students, secondary teachers reported that they had too many other academic demands to also address the social skills needs of their students. There was a general perception that academic accountability was more important than developing students' social skills. Despite empirical evidence of the critical relationship between appropriate social behavior and educational and societal success, accountability in this arena was not given high priority by the teachers in these schools.

Access to curricular materials was associated with higher levels of engagement in social skills activities. A relatively small proportion of teachers, however, reported access to formalized social skills curriculum. Differences in access to materials were reported even to curriculum materials which were technically available to all teachers, such as the New York State Curriculum guidelines and other state and school supported programs (e.g. EPIC, PIP, QIE). There are a number of factors which may account for differences in reported access to these curriculum materials. Teachers who engage in higher levels of social skills instruction may seek out needed resources; conversely, instructional supports may determine which teachers have access to curriculum materials. These possibilities will be further explored as part of a school by school analysis.

Despite limited access to curriculum materials, teachers do not lack for instructional goals in this area. A number of different areas of concern emerged through our initial qualitative analysis of teacher responses. Many teachers see the solution in terms of building the self esteem and self respect of students; others, however, feel that building respect for others is the paramount need. It is clear that there is an extensive job ahead in terms of clarifying objectives and then developing curriculum materials to meet these objectives.

Problems in developing and implementing social skills curriculum and instruction were also noted. Some of the problems, such as a lack of training and time constraints, involve school planning and prioritization of social skills' goals within the educational system. A key factor in this prioritization is the perception held by many that social skills instruction ought to be handled by parents and not by the schools. Some felt that the schools had to pick up this burden only because it was not being addressed elsewhere, while others felt that efforts in this area could not be effective without parent and community support. Many educators, however, see social skills development as a valid educational goal in and of itself.

The role of social skills training in the schools, given current societal problems, is one which needs to be clarified. This will require balancing the need to develop social skills which will enable students to be successful in the schools and beyond, with the realities of other academic demands and the limitations of the school within the broader social context.

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Table 1

Number of teachers responding at each participating school

School	No. of Respondants
A	31
B	23
C	28
D	12
E	11
F	13
G	13
H	15
I	18
J	32
K	9
L	7
M	4
N	12
O	8
P	35
Total	271

Table 2

Methods for delivery of social skills instruction

Proactive
Discrete content area for all students determined by general developmental needs
Discrete content area for all students determined by specific needs of one or more students
Discrete content area delivered only to those students with identified needs
Integration within other academic content areas for all students
Integration within other academic content areas for students with identified needs
Reactive
In-class crisis intervention
Referral of student's with identified needs for outside resources
Not the teacher's responsibility

Table 3

Current and ideal methods for delivery of social skills instruction

	Discrete module	Integrated	Reactive
Current method	75 (28%)	149 (56%)	41 (15%)
Ideal method	68 (26%)	173 (66%)	23 (9%)

Table 4

Current methods of social skills delivery

	Discrete module	Integrated	Reactive
Elementary	60 (33%)	102 (56%)	20 (11%)
Secondary	13 (24%)	26 (47%)	16 (29%)

$_x2$ (2, N=237)=10.91, P<.05

Table 5

Availability of social skills curricula (N= 186 primary teachers; 55 secondary teachers)

	Primary		Secondary	
	N	%	N	%
State adopted	66	35.48	16	29.09
School adopted	47	25.272	9	16.36
Teacher selected: commercial	29	20.59	7	12.73
Teacher prepared	71	38.17	19	34.55
none	43	23.12	19	34.55

Table 6

Teacher access to social skills curricula in relation to their current level of social skills activities

	Level of Social Skills Activities				
	Low (N=41)		High (N=230)		
	N	%	N	%	x^2
State adopted	4	9.76	90	39.13	13.25**
School adopted	5	12.19	61	26.52	3.87*
Teacher selected/ commercial	2	4.88	41	17.83	4.37*
Teacher prepared	7	17.07	93	40.43	8.16*
none	27	65.85	60	26.09	25.24**

* $p<.05$

**$p<.001$

Table 7

Social skills curricula currently used by teachers

State/School Adopted (N=35)	No. of respondants
New York State Curriculum (Preschool, Social Studies, Physical Education, Home and Careers)	20
Effective Parenting Information for Children (EPIC)	11
Prevention is Primary (PIP)	6
Living Together Under the Law; Drug Education	1
Quality Integrated Education	7
Intercultural Arts Curriculum	2
School Improvement Plan	1
Ginn Social Studies: Our Neighborhood	1
Teacher Selected/Commercial (N=11)	
DLM kits and materials	1
Self Dimensions, Inc	1
Skill Streaming the Adolescent	2
Decision Making for Success in Life (Educational Insights)	1
Other (unspecified)	6

Teacher Prepared (N=27)

Individualized programs	7
Daily happenings in family and community; life situations	3
Language skills	2
Social studies	2
Discussion of issues; topical	4
Classroom rules	3
Positive reinforcement	2
General/integrated	5

Table 8

Teacher responses to what they would like to see as the focus of social skills curriculum and instruction (N=169)

Content	No. of respondents	
Individual		
Self respect; self esteem	35	20.71%[a]
Responsibility for actions; How we effect each other	21	12.43%
Problem solving skills (Decision making; conflict resolution; how to deal with peer pressure; self control; application to specific issues (e.g. drugs, single parent))	18	10.65%
Courtesy, politeness, basic manners	12	7.10%
Communicative skills	5	2.96%
Self motivated; independence	4	2.37%
Individualized needs	2	1.18%
Interactions between peers;		
Reduce fighting, tattling Build cooperation, friendship Freedom of expression and not imposing one's views on another	25	14.79%
Relationship to adults		
Respect for adults and authority; Interact with adults in positive ways	20	11.83%

Appropriate classroom behaviors		
Obeying rules; listening skills Ignore disruptive behavior; no antisocial behavior	11	6.51%
Good citizenship		
Understanding role in community; Respect for others; consideration of other's rights	40	23.67%
Cultural awareness		
Knowledge of the world cultures; Respect for different cultures; Tolerant and knowledgeable about people who are different	14	8.28%
<u>Process</u>		
Learn to contribute to small group activities; cooperative problem solving	13	7.69%
Integrated into curriculum; ongoing; infused into daily expectations	8	4.73%
Teachers should serve as role models	4	2.37%
More hands on activities, manipulatives, experiences in the community; simulations; discussion	4	2.37%
Reinforcement of skills	3	1.77%
Teachers, parents and administrators working together	3	1.77%
Responsibility belongs to parents	15	8.87%

Problems

Societal:

I think much of what little is available is too unrealistic in their use and approach. Having always taught in inner city schools that type of thing can be utterly useless. We teach so much fairness, give and take, ignoring reward systems. Life isn't so fair to these children. We need to focus on that . How they can rely on themselves to get through and possibly pull out of their horrible situations.

Parental

Since the parents have failed to teach these skills it falls to the schools to pick up the slack.. The problem is finding time in an already overcrowded schedule.

I feel that it would be hard to teach it and to find which grade level and classes for it to be taught in. And even if it were taught in some cases it might not be reinforced by the child's parents and or community. The students themselves are also going to have to choose what they think is socially acceptable. A lot of students may already be set in their ways. I think it would have to be taught at a very young age and reinforced throughout the child's education

If we believe that a child's basic attitudes and coping mechanisms are in place by age five and if this given child comes from an abusive family or one with minimal to poor parenting skills, what subject/curricula will undo and redo what's been done? Content or knowledge is easy to teach but attitudes are much harder to change if they are changed at all. You want to teach children then change what they see, hear and how they are treated. When movies like Friday 13th part 4000 become a high rating movie to our kids then we got a problem.

Priorities:

Basically, I have no comment because I have a lot of material to cover in one year. There is no extra time for social activities in my class.

Social skills could be taken care of either in a separate class setting or in a health class or in a one on one setting with a counselor

We should stop this focus on self esteem and teach that two wrongs don't make a right and when a wrong is committed a punishment is to be expected. Students must learn that they are responsible for their actions , its not someone else's fault. Youngsters do not fear administration, parents or teachers or the judicial legal system. Why? Our self esteem is so high we see no need to improve- we feel we're always right

Training:

Most college courses were very unrealistic in terms of unavailable supplies and lack of student social skills. Some of the college professors I encountered were so out of touch with problems a classroom teacher faces that their courses were a waste of time.

Need better instruction at college level

Serious problem; would welcome training

Inservice training needs to be instituted to improve students social skills as you aid the teacher in instruction

[a] Teachers often had more than one area listed for social skills curriculum and instruction. Thus, the total percent of respondents across categories will equal more than 100%.